

The Re-rise of “Nationalism” in International Relations: Trump’s “America First” Foreign Policy

Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
3 (1) 77–90

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Kardan Publications
Kabul, Afghanistan

[DOI:10.31841/KJSSH.2021.35](https://doi.org/10.31841/KJSSH.2021.35)

<https://kardan.edu.af/Research/CurrentIssue.aspx?i=KJSSH>

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Abstract

“Patriotism” should not be confused with “nationalism” as both concepts are used so vaguely that any definition could be challenged, however, since these are two different ideas, one must draw a distinction between them. Following the 9/11 attacks, there was a crossroad of patriotism and nationalism. While on the one hand, people's sympathy for the victims of the attacks was patriotism, on the other hand, increased violence, discrimination, and hate crimes on the dark skins of Americans (especially American Muslims) were all the products of nationalism. Since then, America's world view has dramatically changed or perhaps evolved from “liberal internationalism” during Bush and Obama presidencies to “nationalism” and “America First” with president Trump taking office in January 2017.

Trump's America First policy has overwhelmingly paved the way for nationalism to re-rise within the United States as well as in other countries across the globe, populist leaders in Europe, Turkey, the Philippines, and other countries sought the opportunity to accumulate more power and resources through changing their democratic structures and by hijacking the global political leadership vacuum created by Trump's “America First” policy.

This paper, therefore focuses on the interplay and relations between Trump's “America First” policy and the responses this policy gets from other countries on an international level. Existing literatures on international relations and particularly the debates on Trump's foreign policy tend to either overlook the consequences of “America First” policy on international level, or emphasize the lack of cooperation between and among broader international community to tackle the rise of nationalism and authoritarian states. I instead argue that, Trump's “America First” policy provokes other countries to embrace anti-American policies and to promote “nationalism” and “populism” in response to what Trump has been persuading to “Make America Great Again”.

Keywords: International Relations, Nationalism, Trump, America First.

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Introduction

America’s world view has dramatically changed or perhaps evolved since president Trump took office in January 2017. During his run for office, then candidate Trump made “America First” as his campaign slogan. Following his victory, president Trump has officially announced America’s new foreign policy profoundly established in Trump’s “America First” doctrine.

The “America First” is best known as a slogan and a foreign policy doctrine advocated by the America First Committee, ‘an anti-interventionist group that advocated against the U.S entry into the Second World War and emphasized on “American Nationalism” and “Unilateralism” in international relations’ (Brian Bennett 2017).

However, throughout different periods of time, both the democrats and republicans have used the doctrines of “America First”, for instance, ‘president Woodrow Wilson used the doctrine to define his policy of “Neutrality”, while president Harding used the motto to promote his campaign and presidential run in the 1920 elections’ (Rauchway 2016). The usage of the “America First” slogan by president Trump has been criticized by many scholars, politicians and anti-nationalist groups, these critics focus on the historical associations of the slogan with nativism and anti-Semitism. Others, particularly a majority of the Trump’s supporters within the American public, ‘praise his “America First” policy and describe it as a justified act of [patriotism]’(Ibid). Whether these critics and praises are true or not is not the purpose of this paper, but this policy doctrine has largely ascribed to the rise of blind “nationalism” and “anti-Americanism” across the globe.

Patriotism should not be confused with nationalism. Both concepts are used so vaguely that any definition could be challenged, however, since these are two different ideas, one must draw a distinction between them. George Orwell defines patriotism as the “devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people” (Orwell 1945: 23). Patriotism as George described, ‘is naturally defensive both militarily and culturally – Thus justifiable’ (Ibid). Nationalism, on the other hand, is "inseparable" from the desire for power, and the enduring goal of any nationalism is to gain more power and dignity, not necessarily "for itself, but for the nation in which it has chosen to subvert its individuality" (Ibid: 2). In other words, nationalism as Lyon states, “...is the feeling that your way of life, country, or ethnic group is superior to others” (Lyon 2011: 23).

In addition, nationalist views can lead a group to impose its ideology or lifestyle on others, to put it simpler, ‘patriotism is good and justified, but

nationalism is bad and dangerous, which can later lead to global conflicts and war between nations' (Ibid). Practically, 'if you are proud of the soldiers who defend their country, this patriotism is justified, but if you put red, white and blue pajamas on the bed and shout every night before bedtime "Don't paint these colors" - this is nationalism' (Orwell 1945). Moreover, in the days following the 9/11 attacks, there was a crossroad of patriotism and nationalism. While on the one hand, 'people's sympathy for the victims of the attacks was patriotism, on the other hand, increased violence, discrimination, and hate crimes on the dark skins of Americans (especially American Muslims) were all the product of nationalism' (Anton 2019).

As noted above, Trump's "America First" gets different and counter responses from within and outside of the United States; two examples could best illustrate these responses. First, Trump's "America First" approach, 'encourages anti-American and nationalist responses outside of the United States' (Ibid), Mexico, the southern neighbor of the US for example has moved from an American ally to an anti-American, particularly following the tensions on building wall and border protection between the two neighbors. One of the biggest achievements of US foreign policy in the past 30 years as Anton states, 'has been that Mexico has moved from an anti-American country to an American ally, but with Trump's new "America first" policy, the friendship no longer exists and Mexico returns to the anti-American era' (Ibid).

Second, Trump's America First policy has paved the way for nationalism to re-rise within the United States as well as in other countries across the globe. The populists have gained more power and resources to challenge the international order and globalization, for example, populist leaders across Europe, Turkey, the Philippines, and other countries have sought the opportunity created by Trump's "America First" policy to accumulate more power through changing their democratic structures and by hijacking and exploiting the global political leadership vacuum to take advantage of the scrambling international political order. These two examples make me wonder about the danger of nationalism, hate, anger and intolerance reproduced by the "America First" policy as these elements do not fit into international relations which are based on cooperation, integration, globalization, and inclusiveness. Trump's America First policy has been counterproductive both for America itself and for the rest of the world, 'this policy has created a dis-connect between America as the global leading power and rest of the countries relying in America's global leadership' (Ibid).

This paper, therefore focuses on the interplay and relations between Trump’s “America First” policy and the responses this policy gets from other countries on an international level. Existing literatures on international relations and particularly the debates on Trump’s foreign policy tend to either overlook the consequences of “America First” policy on international level or emphasize the lack of cooperation between and among broader international community to tackle the rise of nationalism and authoritarian states. I argue that Trump’s “America First” policy provokes other countries to embrace anti-American policies and to promote nationalism and populism in response to what Trump has been persuading to “Make America Great Again”.

These reflections led me to the following research question

“How does Trump’s “America First” foreign policy provoke other countries to embrace “Nationalism” and “Anti-Americanism”?”

To answer this question, the “Neoclassical Realists” approach will be used to address, understand, and analyze the consequences of Trump’s “America First” foreign Policy.

In his analysis of foreign policy, Steve Smith 2010 describes neoclassical realism as, ‘a joint approach to "classical realism" and "new realists", in particular the advocacy realism theory, originally conceived by Gideon Rose in a 1998 *Global Politics Review* journal’ (Smith 2010). By this approach, ‘state practices in international relations can be better explained by "system changes", such as the distribution of power capacities between states - and "cognitive changes" such as systemic stress cognition or misunderstanding, among others.

The intentions of the states, or "internal changes" such as state institutions and elites that influence the freedom of action in the creation of foreign policy’ (Smith, et al 2018). Moreover, realism in international relations theory ‘is often associated with "real politics" because it is based on both ownership and demand’ (Gerret Ward Sheldon 2003). “Real Politics” in international relations is an ‘outdated perspective on policy-making, while realism is a specific type or methodological framework for analyzing, understanding and explaining events and policies in the global communication domain’ (Ibid). However, the priorities of realist perspective in international relations as Sheldon states, ‘have been to focus on increasing power of one’s own nation such as the case of “America First” over others’ (Ibid).

Nevertheless, in order to further analyze Trump's "America First" policy of the United States and to understand how this policy has developed "nationalism" and "anti-Americanism" all over the world, it is important to understand the historical structure, evolution and some of the most important and relevant academic literatures as well as individuals who have pursued and/or influenced U.S. foreign policy during various times and events. To do so, here follows a brief review of the most relevant literatures discussing the U.S foreign policy formation historically as well as culturally and politically.

2. Literature Review

A big influx in the contemporary international relations literatures asserts that the United States foreign policy has contained multiple historic, traditional and geo-political principles attributed to achieving its imperialist and world's only super power ambitions. However, in order to trace back the founding origins of the U.S foreign policy, Walter Russell Mead in his book *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* published in 2001, classifies four main domains of the American foreign policy, the [Jeffersonism], the [Hamiltonism], the [Jacksonism], and the [Wilsonism] (Mead 2001). These four foreign policy domains have reflected the ideological, cultural, and political origins of the U.S foreign policies over a period of at least 200 years. For example, the U.S foreign policy during the Thomas Jefferson era was focused on 'preserving democracy and avoiding war, especially in the war-torn Europe' (Paterson 2018), and in the Hamilton time (never president) the U.S foreign policy was based on 'promoting free international trade and global economy' (Schroeder 1997).

The Jackson's foreign policy was largely focused on America's national interests, 'Jackson had little regard for the international laws, he advocated for strong national military build ups and was little interested in wars perceived not vital to the American interests' (Hall 2017), and the U.S foreign policy during the Wilson time was shifted to promotion of liberalism and democratic values, 'Wilson believed that democratic countries are partners and therefore it's at the best interests of America to make global partners through promoting democracy and international stability' (Paterson 2018). However, as can be clearly observed, the U.S foreign policy within the four main themes has changed, reversed, evolved and even re-formed in the course of time and events, i.e. for Hamilton, promotion of free trade was at the top of his foreign policy recommendations whereas Jackson's time U.S foreign policy was focused on military buildup and strengthening national economy, and for Wilson

promotion of global governance and creating international organizations to maintain global order.

Moreover, the U.S foreign policy for a very long period of time was founded on "Isolationism" and "Unilateralism", even through and up to the WWII, the American foreign policy continued with its tendencies for isolation and unilateralism, however, on April 2, 1917 when the war between the U.S and Germany broke out and America directly engaged in European war, after almost 135 years, 'the U.S foreign policy for the first time took a real change of direction from neutrality and unilateralism to a multilateral and international cooperation foreign policy'(Walt 1998). The U.S direct involvement in the European war has been considered as a historical moment in the development of modern U.S foreign policy which continued to develop and evolve over the next course of time.

During the WWII and throughout the Cold War era, 'the U.S foreign policy has been dramatically shifting its direction toward the global politics and international relations, the Marshall Plan was the first significant change in the U.S foreign policy towards international development, cooperation and maintaining international order' (Paterson 2018). Furthermore, the subsequent development of the U.S foreign policy after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union has continued to evolve and re-form through and up to the Clinton presidency, 'the U.S foreign policy during the Clinton time continued to build up on the Liberal international order that the U.S had laid as groundwork in the start of the Cold War' (Ibid). The Liberal International order path of the U.S foreign policy evolution continued up to the September 11, 2001 attacks, however, these incidents marked a grand juncture in the history of the U.S foreign policy formation, the post 9/11 U.S foreign policy has dramatically changed its form and direction from its previous historical and cultural foundations, the new post 9/11 foreign policy of the Bush presidency took its new form of aggression, military invasions and occupation of other sovereign states.

Moving on beyond these main four foreign policy themes, the U.S foreign policy has also been attributed with the American "Exceptionalism", the sense that America is special and unique example of freedom, democracy, and individual rights (Ibid). The American "Exceptionalism" in the U.S foreign policy is often interpreted as American nationalism and superiority, even in the 21st century and particularly when Trump took office, 'exceptionalism has its own influence and is now publicly advocated as "America First" foreign policy by the Trump administration' (Ibid).

As is so far discussed, the U.S foreign policy has been subject to multiple changes, re-formations and re-direction throughout different periods of time and events. Trump's America First policy has been yet another form of those historical and traditional changes in the U.S foreign policy though Trump's America First is not new in the U.S foreign policy history, however this policy of Trump administration has been a significant change in the U.S relations with broader international community and is destroying the world's leading position of the United States which it has been trying to build since at least the end of the Cold War era.

In order to further analyze and understand the strand of changes in the U.S foreign policy particularly the new "Trump's America First" policy and to properly answer the research question of this paper which is, *How does Trump's "America First" foreign policy provoke other countries to embrace "Nationalism" and "Anti-Americanism"?*, I would like to first analyze what has been causing America First policy to the United States itself, and then to explain and describe what types of responses the U.S is getting in return from the broader international community particularly in relation to its foreign policy.

I will then conclude the paper by trying to provide some kind of arguments in answering the research question. The next two sections of this paper are the main argument and analyses and a short conclusion of the main argument put forth to answer the research question.

3. Analysis

In international relations and particularly when it comes to foreign policy outcomes, the results materialize slowly. It can take years to destroy alliances and sometimes even longer to witness the real consequences of those damaged relationships. However, in Trump's foreign policy it is the opposite, his "America First" policy outcomes appear quickly and speeding toward a scenario in which neither the U.S long standing allies trust in America any more nor its rivals fear it any longer. The ongoing discussions and efforts between Germany, France, United Kingdom, China and Russia to keep the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA) alive without the United States are a clear result of distrust in America. Likewise, the independent and collective acts by leaders in the Middle-East who were accustomed to listening to the U.S first on any global or regional issue, is an evident fact of not fearing America any longer.

Since World War II, but especially since the Cold War, many countries and even geopolitical allies have abandoned the power of global dialogue with the United States. These countries, 'had no choice but to accept the

disproportionate distribution of global power, consolidated by the United States of America’ (Brands and Fever 2018). However, in return for having such global power and prestige, ‘the United States provided the kind of international leadership which could address the most critical challenges of the world and expanded a system of global economy that spread prosperity far and wide’ (Ibid). Though despite having such great international leadership and a prosperous system of global economy, “many countries still complained about the American supremacy and occasional interferences in the global affairs, but they also often accepted American dominance and leadership just because they could flourish under American leadership of the world” (Ibid: 4).

Nevertheless, over the past decade and particularly after the September 11th attacks, many countries have begun to worry about the decline of the U.S global power and leadership. Furthermore, when president Trump assumed office in January 2017 and announced his “America First” foreign policy, concerns over absence and lack of a global leadership have been raised among countries. Trump’s foreign policy doctrine has been significantly diminishing America’s global power and international reputation, today, world view about America has been no longer of a global leader and super power, America with its new foreign policy agenda is damaging its international image and credibility.

Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Paris Accord on Climate has been solely based on his “America First” agenda. Such decisions back out U.S commitments to international issues and undermine America’s global credibility, “the United States used to be the leader, the convener, and the engine of international diplomacy” (Wright 2018: 12), but Trump’s actions turned the ‘United States into an untrustworthy and unreliable diplomatic outlier’ (Ibid).

Many critics see Trump’s “America First” policy as an inevitable outcome that makes “America alone”. The recent developments in the Middle-East show a significant loss of U.S influence and traditional allies in the region where Iraq relying heavily on Iran and Turkey on Russia for political and military support in the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The Anti-American resentment and loss of global confidence in the United States have increased in recent years. The Iraqi parliament’s January 2020 vote to expel U.S troops from Iraq, and the U.S inability to attract others by the legitimacy of American policies, are clear examples of U.S soft power decline as a result of Trump’s “America First” foreign policy. According to Gallup International polls conducted in 2019 in more

than 130 countries, Trump's "America First" has had a negative effect on the United States global image, according to the polls; many European countries believe that Trump's policies "has hindered efforts to fight global poverty, protect the environment, and maintain peace" (Gallup Polls, 2019).

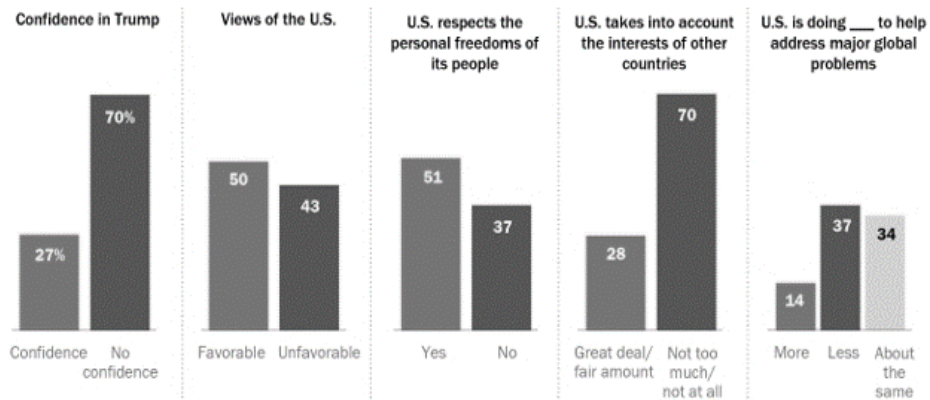
Trump seems to be less interested in foreign policy, 'he was thrilled to be a peace actor when he thought he could exaggerate the threat of North Korea to win the Nobel Peace Prize' (Zakaria 2019). However, when president Trump realized how difficult it is to deal with North Korea, 'he immediately lost his interest in the topic and hardly speaks about it anymore' (Ibid). Furthermore, 'Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East and Latin America has largely been chosen and shaped around the objectives of the sub-contractors – the style known to real estate developers' (Ibid: 2). For instances, 'Trump's policy for the Middle East draws closer to the Saudi and Israeli objectives while in Latin America and particularly in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, everything is given and sub-contracted to the "saber-rattlers" such as senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla) and John Bolton, the national security advisor' (Ibid: 4).

Trump's job in all these foreign policy circumstances is to listen to the sub-contractors and follow their objectives. Globally, Trump's "America First" policy has significantly damaged America's international reputation and credibility. According to a new survey of 25 countries by the Pew Research Center, 'the global U.S. image is much lower now than during Obama's presidency' (Pew 2018). The survey further shows that there is great concern about the role of the United States in international affairs.

As shown in the figure below (Fig. 1), many people who participated in the Pew survey believe that, 'the United States does little to address major global challenges now than in the past' (Ibid).

In addition, according to this study, 'there is little trust in Trump himself and few people believe that the US considers the interests of other countries' (Ibid). Moreover, very few people believe that, 'the United States retains its reputation for respecting individual freedom now then ten years ago' (Ibid: 2).

Figure 1: America’s International Image in 2018



Source: (Pew Research Center, Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q17a, Q30b, Q35a, Q38 & Q39).

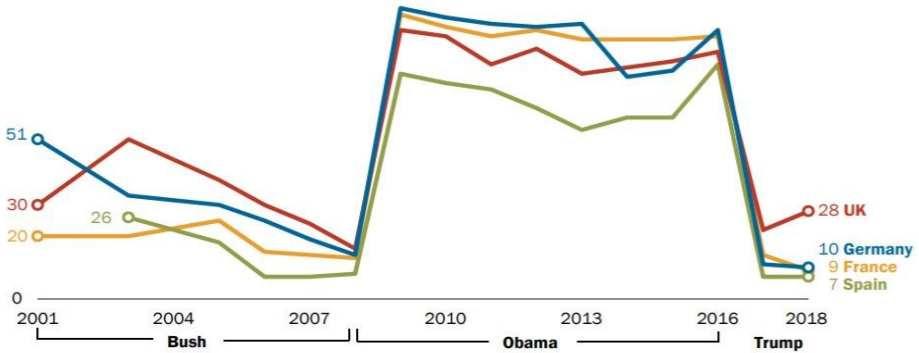
Note: percentages are medians based on 25 countries survey.

More so, beside the damage that “America First” policy has impacted on the international reputation and credibility of the United States, ‘there is a common share in Trump’s foreign policy, which has anti-American and nationalist reactions everywhere from across the globe’ (Zakaria 2019). Take china for example, where the Chines government has offensively denounced America’s aggressive trade demands. According to China Plus, a state-controlled television network in Beijing, the U.S trade war tactics are nothing but those of the previous foreign efforts to subjugate China. The anchor of the TV program said, “... if you want a trade war, we will fight you until the end. After 5,000 years of wind and rain, what has not the Chinese nation weathered?” (as quoted by Zakaria 2019).

In Iran, the “America First” foreign approach enabled the Islamic Republic to resist U.S. economic sanctions and to blame Trump for the anti-Iran policies, ‘not the regime itself for the mismanaged economy’ (Ibid). However, the US has not always been nationalistic though, especially with regards to Iran. Iran’s foreign policy approach as Zakaria 2019 states, ‘is always based on its geopolitical position, not on the basis of its "Shiite" ideology’ (Ibid). Likewise, countries around the globe including those that embrace Trump’s “America First” policy, is becoming more anti-American. Take Hungary for example, ‘where Prime Minister Viktor Orban proudly and publicly stated that he was creating "unrealistic democracy”’ (Ibid). In Hungary, Mr. Orban had already lost many democratic checks and balances; he had been deprived of immigration and states anti-Islam. Orban despite his very well reception by Trump at the with House, ‘has aligned himself with China and Russia to suit his purpose’ (Ibid). Other key

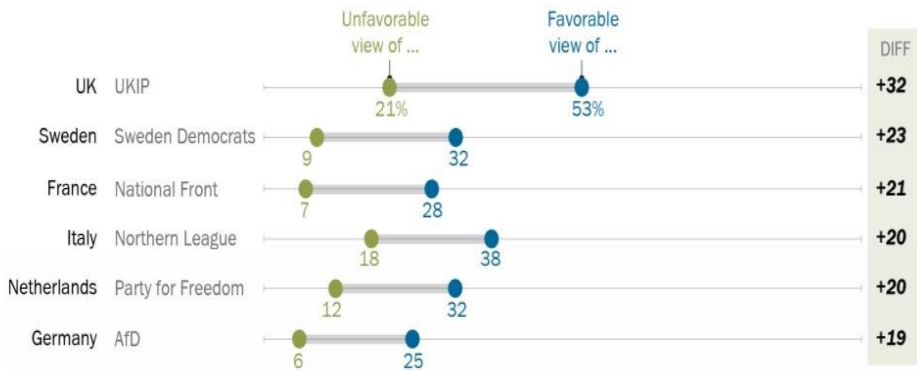
EU countries such as Germany, France and Spain have also less confidence in Trump except for the right-wing populists across the continent who are more likely to have confidence in Trump and his policy. See below figures from Pew Research Center.

Figure 2: Low Confidence in Trump in Key EU Countries.



Source: (Pew Research Center, Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q35a).

Figure 3: Right-wing Populist Parties have more Confidence in Trump.



Source: (Pew Research Center, Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q35a).

Trump covers almost every country with his “America First” policy, but the anti-American and nationalist responses have been mixed. I used the example of Mexico at the beginning of my argument in this article, ‘where the American opinion rate in Mexico fell to less than 32 percent following Trump’s election to the president and his threats to build the “Wall” along the U.S-Mexico border in the south’ (Pew 2018).

While Mexico is only one example, the pattern as Zakaria states, ‘recurs almost everywhere from Canada to France and to other U.S key allied countries’ (Zakaria 2019). However, there are also only two exceptions, ‘Israel and Russia that express greater confidence in Trump than Obama’ (Ibid).

4. Conclusion

The global responses to Trump’s “America First” policy are neither as uniform nor as straightforward as one might expect. General political reactions from other countries can be divided into two categories: those by countries (mostly in Europe) that are ‘critical of Trump’s “America First” policy and consider it as a crisis of “American global leadership”’ (Wong 2019), and those by countries that welcome Trump’s rhetoric and policies as an opportunity to develop nationalism and pursue their populist agendas. However, both these categories are analytically distinct to each other.

At the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, Trump called for a "great re-awakening of nations" and urged world leaders to consider “patriotism” and national interests in their foreign policies. Nevertheless, the type of patriotism that Trump has embraced is ‘nothing other than nationalism and anti-Americanism he has caused to rise across the globe’ (Zakaria 2019), he rejects the idea of international cooperation and the win-win solution for the global conflicts – thus what Russia, Hungary, China, Turkey, Iran, or Mexico is doing, are the easiest and simplest responses provoked by Trump’s “America First” foreign policy.

With his “America First” policy, ‘president Trump is making an increasingly dangerous world that looks more like the 1930s where democracy is under siege, authoritarian powers are growing in strengths and becoming increasingly aggressive, and the populist and nationalists are rising across Europe, East and South Asia, and America’ (Blinken and Kagan 2019). While our today’s world faces its own challenges of 21st century from global warming to global poverty and terrorism, and to the current global economic and health crisis due to COVID-19 pandemic, promoting “America First” with its counter-productive results, would only worsen these problems. The genius of America’s World War II foreign policy was the ‘recognition of the fact that active international cooperation would lead to international stability as well promoting U.S personal interests; that genuine point is significantly missed in president Trump’s “America First” foreign policy’ (Hellman 2017).

So far, the main consequences of Trump’s “America First” have been to provoke other countries to embrace nationalism and anti-Americanism. As discussed throughout this paper, ‘it is still unclear how Trump’s “America First” will serve U.S strategic interests or will help to “Make America Great Again”’ (Blinken and Kagan 2019), but what is clear at the moment is that; “America First” policy is more likely to ‘raise geopolitical tensions and push

other countries to respond with populist and autocratic re-actions, thus growing a dangerous nationalism across the globe' (Ibid).

As a direct result of Trump's policy and the anti-American and nationalist reactions towards his policy, we have a world with less stability, less cooperation, and less confidence in U.S to lead such an unstable world!

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